

Spiritan Horizons

Volume 15 | Issue 15

Article 8

Spring 2020

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Recommended Citation

Beusmans, M. (2020). Mission as a Dialogue between Communities and Religions: Experiences in Mombasa and Netherlands. *Spiritan Horizons*, 15 (15). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol15/iss15/8>

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Mission as a Dialogue between Communities and Religions: Experiences in Mombasa and Netherlands



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tion team of the Dutch province and serves as staff member/chaplain of Social Works in the diocese of Roermond, the Netherlands.

Mombasa, Kenya

I arrived in Mombasa just a few months after the elections in 2007. People were still in shock at the violence that had stricken the country after the results were announced. Mombasa was one of the places that had suffered a lot of violence. Soon I learned that Kenya is a melting pot of almost every sphere of life. The numerous ethnic groups, languages, cultures and religious persuasions make up a complex diversity in the society.

In November 2001, a dynamic organization called Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) was established. Several years before the official start of CICC, religious leaders working in the Coast Province of Kenya came together to reflect on the increasing violence. The immediate cause was the terrorist attacks. In 1998, many people died in bomb blasts in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and of course, the effects of 9/11 threatened people worldwide.

Bishops of different denominations, sheikhs who are members of different Muslim organizations for Imams, and leaders of the Hindu community were convinced that the religious community had to act. The difference now was not to act as a particular church or Muslim organization but to put their strength together and to act as one. This unity is a prophetic sign and shows that religions have a positive role in society to promote peace.

CICC was aware that religious leaders can play a key role in the peace keeping process.

Religious leaders are aware of tensions in the communities and have often a long history of involvement in the societies they serve and are familiar with the context and history of conflicts. Because of their role in church or mosque, they have a moral and spiritual authority that helps them to diminish religious conflicts. In their preaching and teaching religious leaders can share ideas about peace, peace-building, justice and development in the communities and mobilize their followers for peace-building. Religious leaders are also in the position to challenge traditional perceptions and introduce new ways of thinking.

CICC received a grant from the Dutch NGO *Mensen met een Missie* in 2008 and was able to open a special department for interreligious dialogue. I was responsible for this department and I was supposed to train staff members and religious leaders. I experienced a hunger among religious leaders to share more about their faith and religion at a simple (not academic) level. I saw how faith connects people in a community and how it can promote peace. As an advisor of IRD and conflict transformation, I was given the task to build up that ability of staff and to make training materials available for religious leaders. I did this in various ways.

TRAININGS AND RESEARCH

Once a week I gave a training on IRD to my colleagues of CICC. The aim was to give them background information. For me it was even more important to have them talk together and to discuss what was important in their lives; what were their values and faith; what did they experience in their church or mosque etc.

In the first year, I was asked to investigate the understanding of interreligious dialogue among religious leaders. This field research (we chose to organise special workshops to do the research) was carried out in three pilot districts. Religious leaders discussed questions in small groups on the following subjects:

1. What is the link between the local culture and religion?
2. Which role does religion have in giving people an identity?
3. What caused the tension between Christians and Muslims?
4. Why do religious groups become involved in conflicts?
5. What have you learned from other religions?
6. What symbols and/or symbolic actions can be used in praying together?
7. How does the renewal/revival of certain churches affect your church/mosque?
8. Are issues of fundamentalism/extremism discussed in your own church?
9. How do you deal with people belonging to your church/mosque who switch to another religion?

The religious leaders sat together in mixed groups and they loved to discuss those questions. For most of them it was the first time to think and talk about these questions. I was happily surprised by the many answers. It was a sign that there was a need to talk together and a challenge for me to get them talking on relevant issues.

RESOURCE CENTRE AND MATERIALS

The CICC office had almost no material available and so I looked at the possibility of setting up a documentation centre as so many things were happening in Kenyan society at the time: the threat of terrorism, conflict, peace building, trauma healing, a new constitution and the place of Kadhi courts etc. The result was that a year later we had a small resource centre with information on IRD, peace, reconciliation, trauma, conflict management etc. I had bought books dealing with the East African context and written in practical and simple English.

On the internet a lot of information was available too. But many Kenyans—even most members of the board of CICC (bishops of different denominations and sheiks)—were without internet access. I decided to put relevant texts together in small readers. Each reader was dealing with a specific topic. All the board members got a reader and we had extra copies of the readers in the resource centre.

Readers

1. Early warning, timely response.
2. Religion and terrorism.
3. The ambivalence of the sacred; religion, violence, and reconciliation.
4. Religion, conflict and reconciliation; seeds of conflict in a haven of peace; religions view religions.
5. Towards a theology of conflict transformation.
6. Religion and politics.
7. Kadhi courts.
8. Interreligious peace building; working for reconciliation.
9. Religion: conflict, human rights, peace, development.
10. Religious leaders treating trauma.

WRITING A BOOK ON INTERRELIGIOUS HARMONY

I had a practical dilemma. Our funds to conduct training sessions in villages was limited and my mission in Mombasa was for only two years. Therefore, I decided to write a simple book on how to improve interreligious dialogue at grass root level in the hope that when I was gone they would be able to continue on their own. In the book entitled, *Towards Interreligious Harmony*, theory meets praxis. The method in the book is based on the pedagogy of the oppressed from Paolo Freire. Everybody is a teacher and a learner. I had used this method also in Tanzania when I was working for the Catholic women's movement in Same diocese and later on when I was working in Maasai communities. It is an excellent method to get people actively involved, to participate fully, and to talk. Instead of having long monologues, I used different ways to improve the sharing in small groups or in plenary sessions.

The book's contents are as follows.

- Chapter 1: about the organization CICC.
- Chapter 2: the basics of IRD.
- Chapter 3: Results of a field research.
- Chapter 4: twenty-five exercises to promote IRD in the communities.

About the twenty-five exercises:

- some exercises deal with IRD and daily life experiences;
- other exercises help religious leaders to reflect on religion and religious concepts;
- there are a few exercises especially for young people;
- the final exercises contain case studies and stories requiring practical work.

All these exercises can be used as “intra-dialogue” in a religious community, church, or mosque. They can be used in meetings or workshops for religious leaders or other participants of different religious backgrounds. They can be used in specific groups, like a woman’s group or a youth group.

TRAINING OF TRAINERS

To write a book is one initiative. However, I wanted to be sure that the staff members, board members, and religious leaders at district level knew how to use the method and the exercises. Two special “Trainings for Trainers” were organized. I asked my former Maasai colleague to assist me in giving the workshops. The trainings were a great success. From the beginning, we had them involved in the method. This was new for them and a big challenge. Nevertheless, they did their very best when they had to present a new exercise from the book.

Many awareness workshops have taken place to train religious leaders about IRD. In one year alone, we had the participation of 44 senior clerics, 177 clerics at district level, and 810 clerics at local level.

I was happy that I succeeded in several ways to do something meaningful for the CICC organization and particularly for the religious leaders in the field. Unfortunately, I did not get funds to continue this work with *Procmura* (program for Christian Muslim relations in Africa) in Nairobi. So, I had to return to the Netherlands and to find another job.

Roermond, Netherlands

Soon I was asked to become a chaplain on social affairs in the diocese of Roermond with a special mandate for Catholic women organizations and farmers. Fortunately, we have a strong team with some very committed members. Financially we had to look for funds to get our work paid. The diocese pays the salaries of the (part time working) priests and not of the (two full time working) lay pastors! To get money you have to be aware of the interests of the NGO to whom you send your proposals and work plan. Therefore, my work field had changed

a bit. Together with my colleague, I also carry out programs for refugees and interreligious dialogue.

Networking at national level is also very important in our job. So we take part in national committees that have a link with our work. I was asked to become chairperson of the Advisory Board of Mission Activities of the NGO *Mensen met een Missie* (set up in 1931 by mission congregations in the Netherlands).

First of all, let me say something in general about the situation of interfaith dialogue in the Netherlands. As you know, the Netherlands is highly secularized, which has consequences for interfaith dialogue.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY IN THE NETHERLANDS IN 2018

Religiously radicalized groups and individuals who threaten the peaceful coexistence of people negatively influence the way in which society views religion. That is why dialogue is needed more than ever. Dialogue can be a sign of hope. Only the path of dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect can prepare us for the future. This is a challenge for the religious communities. It is problematic that when religion is mentioned, the media pays more attention to the potential for conflict than to the bridging potential of religions. For example, the media give more attention to a mosque that is set on fire than to a synagogue that opens its doors and says, “you are welcome here!” to Muslims whose mosques have been burned down.

Dialogue is not an option, but a vital necessity

The dignity of the human person is fundamental to interfaith dialogue. This human dignity applies to every human being and therefore includes relations with other people and communities. One of the first aims of interfaith dialogue is the promotion of a peaceful and harmonious coexistence. In this way, interfaith dialogue provides an important and direct service to society. I see a great tension between openness and identity. How can people preserve their own identity without cutting themselves off from the believers of another religion? How can people open up to the believers of another religion without losing their uniqueness /individuality?

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to identity. Think of the following:

- the “Black Pete” discussion (the black help of Santa Claus);
- new political parties that are very focused on identity;
- the victim behavior of second generation migrant youngsters from Morocco.

The Language of Religions

In a society that is so searching for its self /identity, there is a need for people who have an understanding of inter-religiosity and who are able to talk about other religions from their own ideological point of view and can make a translation. Different religious traditions form different religious contexts, so there are different religious languages. The believers of different religions have, simply put, different experiences. Even if religions use the same categories, such

as God, love, peace or justice; these words will mean something else precisely because they derive their meaning from the particular religion in which they function.

Because of secularization, the younger generations are unaware of religion, its role in the past, its values and its rituals. Older generations are frustrated (including traumatized by the sexual abuse in churches) and negative and have turned away en masse from everything that has to do with church. They have detached themselves and “liberated” themselves from the straitjacket of religion.

Interreligious dialogue in my work

I have been a chaplain of social work in the diocese of Roermond since December 2010. I have been sent to attend pastoral work at women’s organizations and the farmers’ organization. Over the years, other social themes that have everything to do with justice and peace have also been taken up. We (the DKS team) are present in many places in society and the church and try to follow developments and trends in society. Our task is not to carry out practical tasks, but to raise awareness, mobilize and support people to take the initiative themselves, form networks and be present when another social organization organizes an activity in one of our fields. We are largely dependent on provincial subsidies and sponsors. This means much lobbying, submitting work plans, drawing up reports and sometimes taking up a work field that attracts sponsorship and that is also in the interest of the diocese!

COOPERATION ON SOCIAL ACTION

Asylum Seekers Centre (AZC)

There was a meeting at the end of December 2016 of participants from the government (who run the asylum seekers centre), churches, synagogue and mosque. It was made clear that during their stay in an AZC, asylum seekers would be provided with information about the Dutch Constitution, in particular “Article 1 on equal treatment.” Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, political affiliation, race, gender or any other ground is not allowed.

Training set up from an interreligious Perspective

We took the initiative to provide special training (using the Paolo Freire method). In an interactive way, we had two good trainings with asylum seekers. Everyone had been touched by the mutual openness and the way in which so many personal experiences were shared. All listened attentively not only to customs practiced at a religious gathering, but also to believing customs in daily life. The training ended with a visit to a neighboring church and mosque. Everyone, Christian or Muslim, young or old, wanted to light a candle at the statue of Mary!

Goody bags for Women in the Asylum Seekers Centre

When the chairperson of Limburg’s largest women’s organisation finished her term she took the initiative to do something special for female refugees. She asked the members of the

women's organisation to send in "pampering products" that could be given to refugee women in the AZCs' in Limburg. We visited six asylum centres. Each visit was exciting and different. I made a power point with lots of pictures to explain more about our women's organization. An interpreter translated everything into Arabic. The women were excited to hear that there were women groups in the villages. It can help the refugees to make contact with Dutch women when they have their residence permit.

AWARENESS

Meetings between Dutch Women and People with a different Faith

The director of the Limburg Refugee Council clearly explained the refugee situation, particularly their journey to get to Europe/Netherlands, and their stay in the different centres before they secure refugee status. His colleague, who fled Iraq sixteen years ago, told her story. It aroused many emotions among the women. In the afternoon, there was an opportunity to talk in small groups with one or two refugees who already spoke a little Dutch. Most of them are Muslims. The day ended with an inspiring prayer service. One day a group of twenty-two refugees was present. The day ended with a performance by the folk dance group. Such days were also organised for widows.

Refugee Buddy

Municipalities are already doing much to accommodate refugees. But to have them integrated in the community is more complicated. We set up the project called "Refugee buddy" in parishes. It is a very simple project. Dutch refugee buddies welcome refugees with a (temporary) status who have come to live in the municipality/parish. They help them to find their way in the village. Often practical help is needed to furnish a house and practice the Dutch language. We made flyers to recruit parishioners to become refugee buddies. We also trained the buddies in intercultural communication, prejudice, understanding Islam etc.

Migrant Women's Organization

These women have experienced for themselves what it is like to find their way in the Netherlands as foreigners. It is a very mixed group of migrants and refugees, young and old. Everything was translated into Arabic and/or Turkish. It was great to see the involvement and resilience in these women's groups. Some of them were buddies for refugees.

Day of Judaism

The Day of Judaism in the Netherlands was established a few years ago by the Dutch Bishops' Conference. The aim was to strengthen the dialogue between Christians and Jews and to learn more about Judaism. I presented a paper in 2016 entitled, "The foreigner: threat, enrichment or left to themselves?" This was discussed from a biblical perspective and from a historical perspective.

Stop Radicalization

Radicalization is a sensitive issue. With this meeting, the organizers of a migrant organization want to create awareness. People from the local community, migrants who live in that community, and police officers discussed possible solutions to radicalization.

Iftar Meals

Iftar meals (the meal eaten by Muslims after sunset during Ramadan) were organised by the police for Muslims living in the asylum centre.

Council of Churches Roermond

A walk from a mosque to a church to mosque. In the Turkish mosque a guided tour was given and then a group of people walked to a Roman Catholic church where the diocesan priest from Latin America explained the history of the church building. The walk ended with a communal iftar meal at the Turkish mosque.

People with a Mission

This NGO is set up by religious institutes in the Netherlands for pastoral development. Projects deal with the social power of religion. Preference is given to projects dealing with justice, peace, reconciliation, inter-religious dialogue. MM is active in India, Philippines, South Sudan, Cameroon, Uganda, Bolivia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Congo, Burundi and Colombia.

A committee monitors the projects. I am the chairperson. We support the following projects.

Pakistan: working for a peaceful and inclusive society

In Pakistan, the influence of Islamic extremist groups has increased in recent decades. Violence, discrimination, and injustice against religious minorities and women are on the increase.

Indonesia: Bringing together women of different religions

At a special women's school (supported by People with a Mission), women are trained to be open to other religions and lifestyles. In the first phase of the training, the women talk about each other's faith, rituals and holy books.

Philippines: peace-building through mediation

This is how we are working for peace.

- Bringing together young people from different religious backgrounds in order to overcome prejudices and tensions between them;
- Development of information material for inter-religious peace-building;
- Support to victims of conflict, through aid and legal aid;
- Campaign and lobby for land rights for the Lumads in Mindanao.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My engagement in interfaith dialogue has been very diversified for the past ten years. I often used my creativity to combine experiences and ideas from elsewhere in order to create something new. Interreligious dialogue is an inescapable part of our time. Our society in the Netherlands treats religion, in particular Islam, with a certain negative sensitivity. I think inter-religious dialogue is the best way to resolve tensions in our society and to prevent conflicts or separation.

The contribution of interfaith dialogue can be seen from the fact that:

- The world needs it.
- Religions are not there for their own sake, but for the sake of humankind and to serve it.

AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL, DIALOGUE CONTRIBUTES TO BETTER RELATIONS

We have to recognize that there is only one world and that we are meeting each other increasingly in that world. Relations between peoples, cultures, and religions are becoming increasingly direct, and the need for greater cooperation is essential. That is one way of preventing local conflicts from arising that lead to wars between people in their own country, region, or spreading further afield. Dialogue is not soft. The condition for a good dialogue is that difficult issues are not avoided.

Themes that could usefully bring up the dialogue between religions

- *Care for creation.* Care for the environment, for food and for plant animals and humans is not just a technical problem, nor can it be solved purely by means of technical solutions.
- *Religion and tolerance.* The trend in the Netherlands now is that tolerance is untouchable. In other words, I may express my freedom, even if I insult the other person with it!
- *Religion and citizenship.* Interfaith dialogue can make an important contribution to a positive connection between religion and citizenship.
 - Church/mosque members are involved with others (financial: giving money to the poor; commitment: voluntary work);
 - Church/mosque people: talk to each other/ debate/forum.
- *Religion and upbringing.* How do we make a future generation sensitive to the values of humanity and holiness of life? The transmission of values has changed radically in our society under the influence of secularisation, which calls for a reorientation and mutual exchange.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basic

- Our pastoral ministry should not only focus on liturgy and sacraments. It is also about serving (*diakonia*) and community building to/for all.
- Make time/staff available for it.

Networks

- Work together with representatives of other religions/religious movements. Get an approval by the highest representatives. Next, start with those who are like-minded.
- Form a network of religious leaders of different religions/denominations. Have regular consultations and work together in an emergency situation.

To the community

- See how you can make a certain topic open for discussion by a target group. Make use of different methods (creative, active, theoretical, etc.). Discuss a theme that evokes little aversion but in which you can still get your message across:
 - Peace work: conflict transformation
 - Resilience: against radicalization
 - Celebrating together: interreligious dialogue
- See how to involve schools (basic/medium level).
- Visit each other's prayer houses and have an exchange moment: what each one believes, how do they express what they believe, what they are proud of etc.